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Whether it Rains or Shines Tomorrow

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Nacht
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This book is the English translation of a Japanese light novella.

We have translated this novella with the intent of spreading Japan's unique light novella culture to English speaking readers. In order to spread the world view of light novellas further we have collaborated with the translation website Conyac (https://conyac.cc/en/), which connects professional and aspiring translators with those who need translations.

Together with Conyac we held a translation contest and selected two translators who were familiar with not only the language, but also Japan's unique cultural aspects that appear within the light novella.

On that note, please enjoy "Whether It Rains or Shines Tomorrow".

Glossary

Valentine's Day

On Valentine's Day in Japan, the common custom is for girls to give chocolates to boys they like, often as a love confession. Boys may reciprocate on White Day, March 14th.

Natsuko, Akiko, Fuyuko

Common names for girls using the kanji characters for three of the four seasons.

Natsuko -Summer Child

Akiko -Autumn Child

Fuyuko -Winter Child

Changing Shoes

Japanese schools require students to change into clean indoor shoes when they enter a school building. Most schools have lockers at the student entrance for each student to put their outdoor and indoor shoes into when they enter or leave the school building.

-chan

An informal suffix to add to someone's name. It is meant to sound cute, and is mostly used for young children, or among girls who are good friends.

Last names and First names

In Japan, how you address someone varies depending on 1) your relationship with them and 2) The formality of the situation.

When talking to each other outside of class, classmates who don't speak to each other can address each other with just their last names. First names and nicknamaes are reserved for close friends and boyfriends/girlfriends. Hence, Itsuko's irritation when Takeshi uses her first name.

Yukata

Yukata are a traditional type of Japanese clothing similar to a kimono, but not as formal, lighter, and made of cotton or synthetic cloth. (Kimono are made from silk.) They are often worn in the summer when people go to summer festivals. There are yukata for men and women alike, however a men's yukata will be worn differently and usually has a simple design.

Obi

A long sash used as support to hold up a women's yukata, wrapped around the waist tightly and tied in the back into a decorative knot.

Geta

traditional Japanese footwear that look like sandals made of wood with a thong strap made of cloth. They are usually worn with yukata.

Taiko

Traditional Japanese style drums that come in various sizes. Taiko are

known for their strong, powerful sounds and are often performed in ensembles.

Summer festivals

During the summer months, Summer festivals are events held locally around Japan. Often held at a shrine (but not always), many merchants will open up booths in the festival area to provide food, games, and entertainment. Many people wear yukata to summer festivals in Japan.

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By Madoka Harumi

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Chapter One: Different Worlds

An acidic smell attacks my nose, and I can smell disinfectant.

When I open my eyes, all I see is white. Then the ceiling and a curtain partition. I'm lying down on a bed. I realize that I'm in the health room, a place I'm well acquainted with. The only light hitting me is fluorescent, and I can't feel even the slightest hint of the mid-summer sun. That's a relief, although I also feel pathetic, like some kind of tiny, nocturnal creature huddled away into a hole.

The moment I try to sit up, I feel dizzy and grab the blanket covering me tightly. My straight black hair is irritatingly thick and falling in front of my face. What happened today is actually a common occurrence, so it's not long before I realize that I've fainted again. It has been a while since I've lost consciousness, though.

Today, the sun had been way too bright, like the mortal enemy it always is to me.

I zone out looking at the partition cloth. It vaguely reminds me of a big cherry tree with tons of leaves. It's on the banks of a river that runs through town, and makes wonderful shade on the ground. It's a great tree I often visit that's perfect for sitting under and just relaxing after school, and I was planning to go there today. I guess those plans are sunk.

From outside, I can hear what sounds like the voices of the baseball team at practice. What time is it anyway? My dizziness is starting to fade, so I raise my head, when I notice someone's shadow moving on the other side of the curtain. Must be Ms. Nakahara, the school nurse. I call out to get her attention.

"Oh, you're up?"

The curtain opens forcefully, and I scream, but no sound comes out. The face peeking through the curtain isn't Ms. Nakahara.

It's Takeshi Miyano.

At our school, there isn't a person who doesn't know that name, save any transfer students who have only been here for a day. There's no other reason not to know it. Actually, I take that back. Everybody knows him, period.

He doesn't even need to do anything special, he just automatically stands out. He isn't especially flamboyant or trendy or anything like that. Saying he has a special ‘aura' might be stretching it a bit, but even if you don't want to, you'll notice him, or he makes you notice him-- he's chock full of charisma.

He's got skin that's tanned all year long from being out in the sun, and he always spends break time between classes with an elbow on his desk, like a king ape surrounded by all his little monkey friends. Even among the girls who try to keep a distance from Ape Mountain, there are quite a few

who want to talk to him. I hear he got the most chocolates out of all the boys last Valentines Day, too.

The main reason why he's kept this status with the boys and girls is his nonchalant personality. He knows he's the boss, but he acts no differently than he usually does, as if it were natural to him. Even if he's popular with the girls, his face is just like, "Well yeah, so what?" You'd be pissed if it were anyone else, but the way he just takes everything in stride makes you forget it, and this is apparently just part of his charm.

Apart from that, it's not just his personality, but also his potential. He's great at sports, he's on the soccer team, and his grades are pretty good, too. On the other hand, he skips class all the time, and there are some dark rumors that he hangs out with shady guys from other schools. If you ask any of his adoring fans about that, they'd just say, "Oh, but he's so mysterious! I can't get enough of it!"

His nickname is "Miyano, the sun harbinger," and it's rumored that it rains whenever he skips class.

…That got pretty long. Just thought you should know he's that kind of guy.

I have no other connection to him besides being in the same class, and absolutely no idea why he's here in front of me in the health room.

He must have come from soccer practice, since there's mud dirtying his navy uniform. Noticing my jaw hanging open in shock, he shows his pearly whites and smiles.

"Need some water? I have a cup right here."

He turns around, and I ask him "Where's Ms. Nakahara?"

"She went to the staff room to answer a phone call, and I told her not to worry about you, since I'm here."

Why in the world would he volunteer to take care of me? I wanted to ask, but the room pitched sideways. Dizziness.

It feel like I'm about to fall onto the bed again, but something is holding me up.

The wholesome smell of sweat wafts up to my nose. When I look up, Miyano is holding me up by my shoulder with his arm. Shocked, I pull away from him and end up falling back into the bed anyway. He apologizes.

I pull the covers up over my head, and try to use my already fried neurons to think.

The other girls in my class would be swooning in this situation. That much I know. But I haven't even spoken properly to this guy, and to me, he's the King of the Apes, so the only emotion I can muster is complete confusion.

I slowly pull the covers down to my eyes so I can see, but the moment I try to do that, we make eye contact and I pull it right back up. What's going on here?

"Um…"

He answers my question.

"I carried you here when you fainted."

At last, something that makes sense. So that's what it was. I sigh, and take the covers off my face. I try to sit up, and I don't feel dizzy. I should at least thank him, so I do.

"You can go back to soccer practice. This happens all the time, so I'll be fine." Miyano ignores me, grabs a chair to put next to the bed and plunks down into it.

"I'm kind of worried, so I'll stay here until Ms. Nakahara comes back."

I get worried myself, because it looks like he really means it.

"There's no reason for you to stay."

And, I add silently in my head, this is getting pretty awkward.

As I'm waiting with bated breath for him to just go away and leave me

alone, his face turns serious.

Quickly, he stands up, and looking down at me, claims, "I do have a reason."

It's different from his King of the Apes face, so I'm pretty surprised, but I also get wary. The space between my eyebrows is wrinkling so much even I can easily tell they're scrunched up in a frown. He quickly straightens up and starts muttering, before looking at me straight in the eye as if he'd made a decision.

"If you're feeling better, do you want to go with me to the summer festival the day after tomorrow?"

Between our school and the train station, there's a shrine called the Inahama shrine that holds a summer festival every year. There are tons of booths for food and games, and it's big enough that they even have a fireworks show. Going to that festival, with a boy? I know what that means.

That is, if a boy and girl go to the Inahama shrine summer festival together, they become a couple.

Well, if someone asks you to go, and you say yes, I guess you'd already be a couple at that point. The fact that Inahama shrine's selling point is good luck love fortunes is basically common sense at our middle school. So that's what he means.

"…What kind of joke are you trying to pull on me?"

What else can I respond with? Definitely not, "Oh, going to the festival with YOU? Oh my gosh, I'd love to, I'm so happy!!!!" There's no way I'm saying anything like that.

Miyano has a put off look on his face. He points to it, and says,

"Does this look like the face of a liar to you?"

Even with that expression, he looks like he's having fun, as always. When I nod in reply, he makes a sound like a monkey screaming and scratches his head.

"Why? I am actually doing my best here!"

His cry echoes painfully in my head, and I make a face. He notices it and apologizes, calming himself down.

"This is no lie, and I'm not joking."

This I really don't get, and combined with my headache, irritation creeps in.

"If it's not a lie or a joke, then what is it? Self punishment?"

"I already told you, it's not like that. Why don't you get it?"

He starts scratching his cheek with a troubled look.

"I like you" he says.

Chapter Two: Downpour

I like you.

The words rotate in my head, but analyzing each word one by one, putting it all in capitals, I still can't understand what it means. As I sit there, shocked, Miyano is groaning in frustration with his hands messing up his hair.

What the heck?

A short silence is broken by the sound of the door opening, and Ms. Nakahara coming in. She's a big lady, and her strides are long as she walks past, ponytail swinging behind her.

"You woke up?" she asks in a friendly tone.

I nod slightly and pull the covers closer to me. After giving us a once over, she whacks Miyano on the shoulder jokingly.

"You'd better not be up to any funny business, young man."

His mouth twists into a crooked line.

"As if!"

She shoos him away to the other side of the curtain and rests her hand lightly on my forehead.

"You still might be in shock, but I think it's mostly slight anemia."

My forehead is still stinging, but her cool hand feels good on it. She tells me to rest until I calm down a little more, and I nod.

"Ms. Nakahara!" A hand is waving through the curtain. He's still here? I mutter a curse under my breath.

"I'll walk her home after practice!"

"Wha-!" bursts from my mouth.

"That's okay, I don't need him to!"

"Why don't you take him up on his offer? It'll be difficult for your parents to pick you up, right?"

I hold my head from the headache. I can't argue with that.

If that's the case, I'll just have to get better before practice is over and walk home myself.

But full recovery takes longer than I thought. By the time I get up, the sky outside is dyed sunset orange, and I feel defeated and drained from working too hard. All this even after the burning sun has sucked out all of my energy. The announcement for all students to leave campus plays from the speakers. Time to go home, with the crows.

Getting up from the bed, I stick my head through the curtains. Just as I do, the door opens and Miyano, with a huge smile on his face, peers into the room.

"Nice timing!"

What is? I would say, but I don't have the energy for that, so I let out a big sigh. In the end, I am forced to follow him out of the health room.

The school exit after the last bell is crowded with people from different clubs, students rushing back to classrooms to change clothes, rustling to change their shoes by the exit. We join that flow of students to the exit, when someone calls out to me from behind.

"Natsuko--!" It's my friend from elementary school, holding a trumpet case.

"Leaving now?" she asks.

I nod. "I was in the health room."

"Again? Are you okay?"

Absolutely not. But I answer with a "Yeah," ignoring my fatigue and smiling. I wonder if I'm smiling properly.

"Did you just finish practice?"

"Yep. It's so hot, practicing outdoors is such a drag. Our competition is coming up soon, so it can't be helped, I guess."

"See you later!" I wave my hand at my friend, who leaves for the music room. I watch her leave, changing my sneakers. Miyano is waiting for me by the glass door exit with both hands in his pockets. I make eye contact with him.

It looks like he wants to say something, but I avert my eyes. I close my mouth tightly, and walk past him, opening up my black parasol.

Outside is humid, and the air is hot and sticky.

Tomorrow's the last day of school before summer vacation starts. I

remember that and some of the heavy feelings I'm feeling get lighter, before coming back. Summer will probably end with me not doing much of anything, anyway. I don't hate summer vacation, but I think it'd be nice if we had this long break sometime else. Like in autumn.

I leave from the back gate, walking down a hilly residential street. The sky looked great in the sunset when I left, but now there are thick clouds coming in from the east, and the town is getting dark. The streetlights start to flicker on. Miyano's shadow is stretching onto the street's asphalt. He's been quietly following me.

Miyano is at least four inches taller than me, so of course his legs are long, too. If we walked normally, he would be way ahead of me, but he's walking so slowly, it's unnatural. I can't do anything about that, so I move my legs even slower, but he matches that too.

"You don't have to go out of your way to walk with me," I say.

"Taking it easy is my life motto," he replies.

No matter how much I try to push him away, he responds with his usual happy demeanor. Should I just give up because he's always like this anyway, or should I get angry and yell at him? I don't know him well enough to decide.

He suddenly asks, "Hey, that girl just now…she's Hanamura from the class next to us, right? You've never been in the same class, how do you know her?"

"How do you know that?" I ask, but instead of answering, Miyano grins knowingly. I shouldn't have asked. I guess I'll just have to answer his question.

"In elementary school, we took band together."

I try to make it sound final, but he asks again.

"Why didn't you join the middle school band?"

See, he asks why.

"It doesn't even matter," I mutter. He latches on to that.

"Why don't you just say it, if it doesn't matter?"

I'm so tired I don't even have the energy for a counterargument. This is why I hate people who can't take a hint.

"Because our school's band does marching."

Marching means you do parades and field shows outside under the blazing sun. You'd even get to do cool performances at amusement parks, with uniforms that look sharp like an army, with synchronized movements and dancing. There's no way I could do that. If I could, I'd love to, but I'll never say that out loud.

Miyano suddenly stops, staring at a large poster on the town bulletin board. It's a poster for the Inahama Shrine summer festival.

"You still haven't answered my question."

First, you make me answer your questions that I really didn't want to talk about, then you just ignore mine?

Then, I really snap at him.

"What's your problem?"

"I asked you to go to this with me, you know."

I really shouldn't have asked what his problem was.

"We could check out all the booths, I really want to do that. I think it'd be super fun," he continues, eyes sparkling. I can't believe his nerve, ignoring all of my feelings, and promising it'll be "super fun." I am beyond irritated and feel disgusted with him.

"Would you stop messing around? We've never even spoken to each other!"

Miyano grabs his hair, looking at me indirectly from the side and muttering awkwardly,

"Well, I know, but… am I not allowed to ask you to a festival just because we've never spoken before?"

I almost began rebutting him, but close my mouth instead. It should be obvious.

As if he could read my mind, he continues speaking.

"I keep telling you, I'm not joking, Itsuko. I've been watching you, and I thought we had a lot in common."

My eyes narrow at his casual use of my name.

Then, I feel something lukewarm hit my cheek.

"It's raining," Miyano mutters, looking up at the sky unhappily. I follow his gaze.

Gray clouds spread over the sky.

As I look up at the raindrops falling from those clouds, something dark blocks my view. Miyano is holding up a dark navy umbrella over me.

"I'll let you borrow this"

When I don't grab it, he puts it in my hands and says, "Just take it."

His hand is surprisingly big, and when I try to pull mine back in shock, he catches it.

I'm about to tell him that my house is close, and I already have a parasol, but he says, "Worry not" like some kind of samurai, and forces me to take the umbrella with both of his hands. The raindrops get bigger and bigger and Miyano's shirt starts to change color.

"My house isn't even five minutes away if I run. See that tall apartment building over there? That old house across from it is mine," he explains.

"Right, it's raining, so I'm making a run for it. Let me know about your answer for the festival tomorrow! Get some rest!" Those are his last words to me as he dashes into the rain. I am left all alone, and I watch him leave.

Suddenly, I feel as if the rain has gotten louder. My first thought is that it only sounds louder because that noisy Miyano left, but the rain is picking up and keeps getting stronger. Then I hear thunder rumbling like an empty stomach.

Looks like a storm is coming.

I lower Miyano's umbrella down to my feet and close it. I don't really want to use an umbrella that someone forced onto me. Plus, I don't mind the rain. It blocks the sun. It's not like I have a long walk in front of me, either. I run through a curtain of rain with the folded umbrella in my hand. The warm rain beating down on my overheated arms and legs feels pretty good.

My house is on an easy slope, and I reach the entrance quickly, breathing heavily. I put down Miyano's umbrella near my feet and open the door.

Nobody's home, and it's dark, but I take in that home sweet home smell that I'm used to and relax a bit, as my body suddenly feels very heavy, and a little sore. It wasn't such a great idea to run just after fainting. It's too much of a hassle to turn on the lights, so I walk down the dark hallway with wet feet. My soaked socks leave footprints behind me.

I wipe my hair down with a towel from the bathroom and wipe my face, too. The dry towel smells like the sun, and I remember what Miyano said.

I can't believe he called me "Natsuko."

With the towel wrapped around my head, I go to my room. I guess it's okay. I take off my school uniform and say it out loud to no one in particular. Whatever. I don't care.

I'd be lying if I say I'm not even 1% happy that someone confessed his feelings for me, but the other 99% is irritation.

Don't even try to say we're anything alike.

Chapter Three: Natsuko

It stops raining by morning, but the clouds are still thick. The sun is hiding behind clouds, enough to make you wonder how it was so sunny yesterday. I'm kind of disappointed. Normally, this is where you would shout in glee for summer break.

I was so irritated last night that I couldn't stop thinking and didn't get much sleep. Stifling a yawn, I spot something on the ground by a bicycle shelter near the bulletin board we passed by yesterday.

A bear keychain.

It's a wooden bear in a burnt brown color about the size of my hand, no more than three inches tall. He has a shiny round face and little black dots for eyes. His mouth is shaped like a U, and he has two half moon ears popping out of his head. His body is round like his head, and he's wearing a yellow t-shirt and red boots on his feet. He doesn't look that worn out, and he was under the bicycle shelter, so the rain didn't hit him last night, either.

"What's that?"

I let out a yell in shock from the voice behind my back. When I turn around, Miyano is standing behind me, looking surprised himself.

"Why are you so surprised?" I ask him.

"Well…I mean…if you turn around like that…"

At first I wonder why he's stumbling over his words, before I remember our conversation yesterday and get angry again. I turn away from

him and walk away.

"You're not going to pick it up?"

I was going to ignore him, but I turn around slowly. Miyano is pointing to the bear on the ground.

"It's not mine."

"But you looked really interested in it."

About to respond, I close my mouth again. Bicycles pass by, and a humid wind blows past us. Miyano crouches down to look at the keychain like a little kid would observe ants.

"There's a serial number on the bottom of his foot!"

"So?"

"It could be important to someone."

"And?"

"So why don't you pick it up?"

Why do I have to hear this from you?

"If it's something important, won't it be easier for the owner to find it if we just leave it here?"

"But…" Miyano stands up and looks at my face seriously.

"This is a bicycle stand. It could be knocked around by a bike, or a stray cat, or get hit by a car. Itsuko, are you still going to leave this poor bear here knowing that?"

…Why am I the one being attacked here, like I'm abandoning a stray dog?

"Why don't you just take it, Miyano?"

"I think it would rather be rescued by you, Itsuko."

What does that even mean? And since when are we on a first-name basis?

"Just make sure you take care of it!" he says.

"Hey!" I yell at him, but he takes off in the opposite direction without giving me any time to stop him.

"What's wrong with you?"

I realize that I'm yelling and stop. When I look around, there are other students walking by on their way to school, and they're giving us looks. I grab the keychain and run away.

It's already so hot, but my face and body start burning red.

I can't stand him!

I reach my classroom and catch my breath. The curtain is usually closed tightly, but right now it's completely open. I feel better. With today's weather, there's no need to close the windows.

I'm relaxing when girls from my usual group of friends start up a conversation.

"Natsuko, did you faint again yesterday?"

It's almost scary how fast information travels around school. I tell them I'm fine, and sit down at my desk.

"Must be hard, living with a UV allergy."

They say it like it's someone else's problem. Just leave me alone, quit talking about it. I remember a similar conversation from last week.

On that day PE class was swimming in the outdoor pool, so I was studying by myself in the classroom. It was blazing hot, the sunshine hot enough to burn your skin, and even the classroom was uncomfortable. I gave up studying halfway through class time and decided to take a nap. My friends came back after PE class, laughing and smelling like chlorine.

"You okay?" I sat up when I noticed my friend looking at me with a worried look on her face.

"Yeah, I'm fine" I said, laughing.

"Poor thing," my friends started to talk, one after another.

"It's such a nice day!"

"The pool was nice and cool."

"At least you won't get a weird tan, Natsuko."

It was in the middle of my friends talking around me, left and right, when something white flew into my sight.

A damp, white towel fell onto my friend sitting right in front of me, right on her head.

"Oops, Sorry!"

Miyano apologized, though he didn't look like he thought he did anything wrong.

"My hand slipped," he said, laughing it off.

"Hey, cut it out!" said my friend. She looked like she was having fun, even if she acted like she didn't like it. She threw the towel back to him, and the topic changed.

I was actually kind of grateful to him for being the reason why the topic changed, although it had looked like he wasn't doing it on purpose.

I look at my school bag propped up on my knees. The bear keychain Miyano told me to pick up is stuffed into it.

What should I do with it?

I rest my cheek in my hand, and give a little sigh. My classmates must be happy that summer break is starting, because they're all sporting cheery faces. I don't see even a speck of depression on them.

Back in elementary school, whenever summer came, I had to wear a large straw hat to block out UV rays.

"When Itchan takes out her hat, summer comes!"

I don't remember who it was, but someone said that, and my nickname, which until then was Itchan, became Natsuko, summer child. In that moment, I became the butt of everyone's summer jokes and their summer poetry parodies, even though I hated summer. Even when we became middle school students and my hat was traded in for a parasol,

everyone kept calling me Natsuko.

The chime signaling the start of class rings, and we all take our seats. Our teacher enters the classroom. Morning homeroom is over quickly and we all line up to walk to the gymnasium. Time for the end of semester assembly. Chatting with my friends, I look into the classroom. Even though he was walking around town earlier in his school uniform, Miyano hasn't shown up.

One of my classmates looks outside the hallway window and I hear him say, "It's raining." I can see the gray clouds outside, but from where I'm standing, I can't see any raindrops.

"Probably because Miyano's skipping again." Someone else replies.

The assembly finishes while I'm zoning out. The principal's speech and everything the other teachers tell us are always the same, winter or spring break, and I won't remember a thing they say by the time I get back to the classroom. What does stay in my mind is that thanks to the rain, the gym is stuffy and humid, and the floor and windows are wet with condensation. I don't mind the smell of rain when I'm outside, but here in the gym, it mixes with the smell of too many people in one place, and it's hard to breathe.

We get our report cards, and in that not-good-not-bad kind of atmosphere, we start our last homeroom class of the semester.

"Ms. Sasahara?" the teacher calls out to Mana Sasahara, and she walks to stand in the front of the class. Immediately, the class settles down. Mana

runs a hand through her short brown hair that's a little wavy, and looks a little like she'd rather not be standing there. She has big, strong-willed eyes, but they're looking nervously left and right.

Encouraged by our teacher to speak, she looks at us and begins.

"Thank you for being such great friends to me all this time."

It's a pretty clich? line for Mana, who is a chatterbox, and usually goes on and on without hesitating.

"If you ever come to Osaka, make sure you give me a call," she finishes, and bows. Someone starts a slow clap, and the classroom is soon full of applause. The class president hands her a big card with messages from everyone on it. Mana shyly takes it. It's a square card covered with our messages written in colorful pink, green, and blue ink. She thanks us for it and bows again.

Good luck in Osaka.

I can see my message just under her left hand. It's short, and there's a lot of blank space around it. Sometimes, people say, "read between the lines," but I'm sure you can't read anything from my message.

"Well then, be safe and enjoy your summer vacation," our teacher says, and the first semester is over.

The girls call out to Mana and start to crowd around her desk, bringing out colorful pink and yellow flower-patterned envelopes out of their bags to

give to her. Some of them even brought her small farewell presents.

Mana thanks them, looking like she's about to cry.

"Thank you so much, I'll treasure them!"

I watch this from a distance, finding it hard to break the mood by leaving the classroom. I can't take the awkward feeling I get from just watching it, and look away. My eyes land on Miyano's empty desk.

It's the last day of the semester, and he didn't come to school.

It's a half-day, so I leave. The sky is still full of thick and heavy clouds. Students in clubs brought home lunches and will be staying at school for practice. I walk straight for the back gate through groups of excited students looking forward to their summer vacation.

"Hey."

Miyano is leaning against the gate's stone pillar. He's still in his school uniform and not holding anything, just like this morning. I wonder what he was doing all this time during the assembly he skipped.

"Did you pick up the bear?"

I don't feel like answering him, so I silently take the keychain out of my schoolbag and show it to him.

"Let's go find the owner together!"

"Why!?" l realize that I'm yelling, and cover my mouth in a hurry. Some students nearby are looking at us curiously, and their gazes pierce

through me. I run away to the fence and start arguing.

"Why do I have to do that?"

"Why not? Do you have something else to do today?"

Of course I do! I try to count them off on my fingers, and know it's pointless.

"Does not caring about whose bear it is count as a reason?" I ask.

Miyano, pain that he is, starts fake sobbing. "How could you be so cruel?" he cries.

"I'm going home. Bye."

He stops his fake sobbing instantaneously the second I turn around.

"Are you really sure about that?"

He is looking down at my face like he's inspecting it for something. Then he starts to say in an overly-exaggerated manner, "You know, I didn't want to say this, but...I saw you yesterday."

I have a bad feeling about what he'll say next, but I ask anyway.

"What did you see?"

"You didn't use your parasol."

He continues rapidly.

"You never leave school without your parasol. But you didn't use it yesterday on purpose, and that's why you passed out. I saw you, and carried you to the health room."

I remember how my vision went white from the blazing sun, then the

world tilting sideways, swerving like the teacup ride at Disneyland. Whenever this happens, the moment my body loses to gravity, one thought always crosses my mind--

Here we go again.

I glare back at him.

"Do you have any evidence of that?"

"Nope, but I saw it," he says decisively.

"Maybe I should tell Ms. Nakahara about what you're doing, huh? I bet she'd have to tell your parents, too, and then..."

I can't believe it. My hands, on the verge of shaking, clench tightly into fists.

"I can't believe you're trying to blackmail me!"

"But it'

d be great if we found the owner of that keychain, huh?"

I glare at him with all my might, but he's the King of the Apes, nothing fazes him. He just smiles and doesn't budge at all.

I kick the ground in frustration.

"Fine. I'm going home, changing, and eating lunch first. Then we can meet up. Got it?"

Miyano brightens up at that. "Okay! Meet me at Central Park!"

He runs away like a dancing gust of wind. I stand there watching him go, just like yesterday.

I hear the shouting voices of a sports club at practice from a distance, and it's quiet again. Suddenly I feel lonely and I shake my head. I feel like dead leaves and trash left on the side of the road after being blown around by a hurricane. I feel like I've been played around with by Miyano's strong personality, and mentally stomp in frustration.

Chapter Four: The Search

Five minutes from the station, there's a park for children with swings and a sandbox that we call Central Park. When I arrive, Miyano gives me a little wave. For some reason, he's sitting on the bench, still wearing his school uniform.

"You didn't go home? What about lunch?" I ask.

"I ate out," he replies, standing up quickly. He dusts his pants off gently, and looks me over from head to toe.

"What?"

I look down at my clothes. I'm wearing a yellow T-shirt, a long denim skirt, and leather sandals. Nothing special. I glare back at him, and he says it's a rare look for me while looking away.

"What about the keychain?" he asks.

At his request, I take it out of my tote bag. Miyano brings his face closer to look at it closer. I always thought he'd smell gross from running around all the time, but the smell coming from his neck is cool like the rain, with nothing else mixed into it. It's embarrassing for a moment. Then, I recoil from him.

"Look at his back."

Miyano, who seems totally indifferent to my flustered state, points to the back of the clothes the bear is wearing. There's a green four-leaf clover with the word ‘Clover' printed in black letters.

"That sounds like a store name. Do you know any shops named

Clover?" he asks me.

"There's a shop with that name near the overpass," I reply. He then points to the bottom of the bear's right boot. A four-digit number is etched onto it. "If we have a serial number, maybe we can ask someone from the store about it," he says, and soon enough, we're on the move.

He doesn't know the way, so I take the lead, wondering why I'm letting myself follow this guy around for the second day in a row.

It hasn't rained since this morning. The asphalt is slightly damp, and looks much darker than its usual gray hue. Traffic is sparse on the four-lane street we're walking on, and the residential area we're passing through is calm and quiet. Raindrops collected on the bright green leaves of the trees around town reflect light every once in a while, shining and glittering in the afternoon sun.

"Here it is." I stop in front of the shop. We're on the sidewalk of a main street, and there's a show window on the first floor of a tall apartment building with quilts, dolls, beads and accessories neatly lined up in it for display. On the wooden door to the small shop hangs a sign that says "Import Shop Clover" in a round font. I've heard of this shop, but never been in it.

I take a look in the shop through the show window. The shop has a bright and warm atmosphere, with ivory wallpaper on its walls. I see stuffed animals of various sizes arranged on wooden shelves, and fabric goods like tablecloths. There are no customers, and a saleswoman is

looking through a notebook at the cash register.

"Okay, you go and ask."

"Why me?"

"Because," Miyano says, looking down on me self-importantly with his hands on his hips. "I'm a guy. You can't expect me to go into a store like that. I'll wait for you outside."

I leave him there and open the door of the shop. The inside is air-conditioned and chills my skin, and I'm surrounded by a floral scent. The saleswoman greets me with a cheerful hello. She's smiling at me. It's awkward because I'm not going to buy anything here.

When I turn back, I make eye contact with Miyano through the glass door. He breaks into a broad grin until his teeth show and makes a thumbs-up sign, as if to say, "Go for it!"

Not again.

I walk to the cash register, take the keychain out of my tote bag, and place it on top of the register.

"I'd like to ask about this keychain," I tell the saleswoman. "Was it sold here?"

"Oh, this takes me back." She smiles fondly, touching it gently with her white fingers.

"We had it last year. There were only two of them, because the owner hand-made them herself!"

"I see," I say, nodding and wondering what to ask her next. She must like speaking, because she keeps up the conversation.

"A girl about your age came and bought them both. She looked really happy when I told her that there were only two at this shop. That's why I remember this keychain so well. I think she was wearing a school uniform, from the middle school close to here. Did she give it to you?" she asks.

When I leave the shop, I go to a small park just near the shop with Miyano. It is noisy with elementary students playing around. I sit on the iron fence and tell him what I heard from the saleswoman.

"So the person who dropped it is a girl from our school,"

Miyano repeats my information, and starts to think hard. I watch him think while sipping from my bottled tea.

"I don't think we'll be getting any more clues here. Besides, our summer vacation is going to start tomorrow. We wouldn't be able to find the owner of this bear even if we wanted to. If you really want to return it, can't you ask a teacher to put a notice on the school bulletin board?" I say to him.

I'm sweating a lot, maybe from walking around so much. Even if the sun isn't out, it's still summer, and it's unbearably hot.

I use a towel to wipe the sweat off my face and the condensation off my bottle and notice that Miyano is staring at me. In contrast to me, he's tanned and isn't even sweating. His face looks somehow worried, not like the usual happy-go-lucky face he usually makes.

"...What?"

I hate to admit it, but I startled by that. I didn't know that he was even capable of making serious faces.

"Are you seriously saying that?" he asks.

"Why wouldn't I?" I stand up, stepping firmly on the sand. "Why are you taking this so seriously?"

Miyano doesn't answer, and the irritation I almost forgot about starts bubbling back up and taking shape.

"I've had enough of you and your jokes. I'm not afraid of you."

Saying so, I try to convince myself that I'm right.

I walk past him to the park's exit.

I don't care who he tells. He can go ahead and tell Ms. Nakahara, or whomever he wants. I hear him calling my name, but I run home without looking back.

I slam the front door open with a loud bang when I get home. I get in and dash upstairs to my room.

The door has been shut for a while, so my room is stuffy. My sweat, which was dripping earlier, runs down my face in streams.

Give me a break!

I get more and more frustrated, and my eyes are close to tears.

What the hell?!

In the corner of the room, I see my blue school bag, which is larger than it looks and functional enough to contain not only my textbooks, but also my gym clothes. There are two pockets in it, one big and one small, one of which has a bear keychain attached to the zipper.

He's made of wood, has a small round face, wears yellow clothes, and has a serial number etched into his red boots.

I should have taken it off and shoved it into the back of my desk drawer. No, I should have thrown it away somewhere, like Mana did to hers.

I take my tote bag off of my shoulder and place it in the opposite corner of the room, regretting that I didn't give Miyano the keychain in that bag to deal with.

I stand there motionless between the school bag and the tote bag, dripping sweat.

The second hand of the wall clock ticks off time precisely. A little bit of light shines through my thick curtains, but it's dim and makes the room dark enough to blur the outlines of the furniture in my room.

If only I could melt away into nothing. The room is quiet, but my mind is loud and noisy.

I can't help but feel how irritated I am, about the thrown-away keychain, Miyano, and everything. I remember how he called me Itsuko instead of Natsuko, and feel angrier.

The only person who never called me Natsuko was Mana.

Mana graduated from another elementary school, and we were in the same class for the first time in our first year of middle school. She must have thought it was strange that everyone called me Natsuko, because one day, she asked me why out of the blue, even though we weren't really friends then.

"Everyone thinks of summer when they see me." I answered.

"Why? I don't get it." Mana widened her eyes.

"I think Akiko, or maybe Fuyuko is a better match. I mean, you don't get excited easily, so you're not very summery, if you ask me. You're more the gloomy type!"

Looking back, I think calling someone gloomy during your first conversation with them should have been kind of rude, but it didn't bother me then. I was more surprised to find someone else who also understood the fact that "Natsuko" isn't a proper nickname for me.

Calling me gloomy might have been pretty rude, but it was refreshing to have someone like Mana around, who always spoke her mind frankly. She never believed rumors or followed the majority to fit in. Mana was the only one who called me "Itsuko" while everyone else called me "Natsuko". That was enough for me, as long as Mana was the one person who really understood me.

At least, that's what I thought.

I crouch down to remove the bear from my school bag.

"Happy birthday, Itsuko!"

Mana had given it to me for my birthday last year.

"I got one too, they're a pair! See, the serial number is only different by one!"

But she threw it away.

Tears fall before I know it. It is nothing more than humiliation that Miyano suggested we go find the owner of the keychain.

I stuff the bear I'm holding deep into my tote bag. I bet they weren't ever expecting to meet each other again like this. I'll just give them both back to Mana.

I wipe my tears away with a handkerchief, grab the tote bag, and rush out of my room again, slinging it over my shoulder.

Chapter Five: Mana

As I leave my house in a hurry, Miyano is leaning on a telephone pole across the street.

"Where are you going?" he asks me.

I don't answer. I straighten my back and walk quickly past him.

"Are you mad at me? If I did something wrong, I'm sorry," he calls after me, but I ignore him and keep walking.

I turn one corner, then another. He's shut his loud mouth, but he's still following me. If he's going to follow me like a guardian angel, I'm going to get even more annoyed because I'm now heading for Mana's house.

I stop and turn around to face him.

"Could you stop following me?"

"Sorry," he says, voice sad, looking down and slightly biting his lip.

"I didn't mean to upset you"

I laugh through my nose. No way I'll play his game and follow that with, "Then what did you mean to do?"

"Just leave me alone! You are such a pain!" I yell, but I see his face and close my mouth. His face isn't just pale. It's that bluish-white color that your face takes on when it's not getting enough blood. Just when I begin to think that maybe he's sick, he speaks with a voice just barely strong enough to register.

"Okay, I'll leave."

He slowly raises his head.

"But could you go to the place with the city bulletin board we saw yesterday, before you go wherever you're going right now?

When I ask why, Miyano doesn't give me an answer.

"If you promise you'll go there, I'll go away."

Why do I have to follow your orders? I think, but the look he's giving me is piercing, and I can't get away from it.

I try to leave by turning around.

As I pass by Miyano, he looks relieved and almost sad, like he's given up on something.

Walking fast, I remember something from a while ago.

On that day in May, the sun was bright, as if summer was already starting, and it was around 80 degrees outside. I was feeling down because it was obvious summer was coming soon. I'd left the classroom hurriedly for an appointment with my allergist, when I realized I left my pencil case in my desk, so I went back to the classroom to get it.

"Natsuko has a really tough time, doesn't she?"

I stopped in the hallway when I heard the familiar voices of my classmates.

"I know, right? She can't do P.E, and she can hardly go outside!"

I took a peek into the classroom through the small window on the door to see who was speaking. It was a group of three girls I always eat lunch

with, and Mana.

I knew they weren't saying it out of spite, so I wasn't angry or anything, but I thought, "Oh, so that's what they talk about when I'm not around." It was also reassuring that Mana wasn't contributing to the conversation.

But it felt like listening in on someone spreading rumors about me, and it didn't feel good.

What to do? Should I walk in and pretend I didn't hear anything?

I hid behind the door, thinking in circles.

That was when Mana walked into the hallway, saying goodbye to the others. We bumped into each other with surprised shouts. Even though I knew I didn't have to, I ran away from her.

"Wait!" she yelled, running after me. Between me, the girl who has to sit out more than half of all our P.E. classes, and Mana, member of the track and field team, she was obviously the superior athlete. She soon caught up to me and grabbed my sleeve.

"You don't have to worry," Mana said, trying to catch her breath. She smiled at me.

"They didn't mean it that way."

Unlike her, I was breathing hard, and I don't know why, but for some reason I got really, really angry. I was fine when I heard everyone talking about me, but the moment I heard those words from her mouth, my blood boiled over.

I slapped her hand away.

"Don't you dare feel sorry for me!"

By the time I noticed the change in her facial expression, it was too late.

"And when did I ever feel sorry for you?"

I knew that Mana had a short fuse. So why didn't I think about it before I said that?

"You always did!"

She glared at me, face angry, then her mouth lifted up into a smile.

"Yup, that's right," she said, laughing and nodding. "I've always been perfectly healthy, so I guess I'll never know what it's like to be like you, **Natsuko**."

Mana turned her back on me, and walked away in big strides. I also turned my back to her.

I haven't spoken to her since.

I get to the street where I can see the town bulletin board, and stop dead in my tracks.

Mana is sifting through the shrubbery with a serious expression I've never seen on her before.

"What are you doing?" I ask from a distance, raising my voice just a little.

I have a feeling that if I don't do it now, I'll never get to speak to her

for the rest of my life. My voice wavers, almost dying out at the end of my question.

Mana notices me, looking up and widening her eyes. Then, she looks away.

The few seconds of silence between us feel like forever before it's broken by Mana moving her body to face me, looking away, and mumbling,

"I dropped something, but I can't find it."

She looks down at the shrubbery. "I think I dropped it around here."

I slowly walk to her side. She looks at me from where she's crouching. I take out the bear keychain out of my tote bag, holding it out for her to see.

"I found it around here this morning," I say.

Mana gasps, taking the bear keychain carefully from my hands. Then, she checks the serial number on his boot.

"It's my bear!" she blinks repeatedly and says it again. "This is my bear! I can't believe it!" She grabs my hands tightly.

"Thank you, Itsuko! I was looking all over for it since yesterday!"

She keeps thanking me, again and again, blood rushing to her cheeks. I wasn't expecting a reaction like this.

"You were looking for it all this time?"

She cradles the bear in her hands and nods.

"I couldn't apologize to you without it." she says.

I find myself close to tears again, starting to hate myself.

I start to apologize, but Mana stops me.

"No, it's okay. I was really angry because it felt like you thought I was

like everyone else, and I didn't want you to think of me that way... I'm sorry," she says, face falling. She rubs her eyes quickly and apologizes again. "I'm really sorry."

I shake my head.

"I'm sorry, too. "

You were the only one who didn't call me Natsuko.

I don't even have time to think ‘Oh no, here they come' before tears start trickling down my cheeks.

"Don't cry," Mana says hoarsely, flicking my forehead. We see each other's faces and feel a little embarrassed, so we sniff and smile at each other.

Chapter Six: Promise

The thick clouds that had covered the sky earlier are starting to disperse. When I look east, there's a beautiful bittersweet orange color contrasting against the sky's dark gray.

Mana and I made plans to meet tomorrow before we parted ways. I have so many things to tell her that I can't stand still. Grabbing my parasol from my tote bag, I open it and run through the sunset-orange tinted residential area.

Just leave me alone!

The words I said earlier now prick at my heart like thorns, and I start to hate myself for saying them. My regret turns into a restless feeling in my heart that makes me run even faster.

When I reach the school, I stop running. I hear students' voices, the ping of a baseball being hit, and the sound of woodwind instruments from the band in the distance. Miyano skipped school; he wouldn't be here. I keep running.

I take my usual route home, turning the corner and running along a stone block wall. Soon, I see a high-rise apartment building. I find a house that has a doorplate with "Miyano" written on it. My blood is pounding through my veins. It's a two-story house with a tiled roof, and its outer wall

is so old that its beige color has faded off into bald patches.

Right next to the house is a tin-roof garage, but there are no cars parked in it. All I see is a dark blue mountain bike parked in a corner. On the bike, TAKESHI MIYANO is written in permanent marker, standing out in big block letters. I wipe my sweat off with the back of my left hand, which is still holding my parasol, and timidly press the button on the intercom.

I wait for a few seconds, but no one answers.

I take a step back from his house, and look again at the residential street I was running through. There's nowhere left to go, and I couldn't go anywhere even if I wanted to. I'm out of breath for a long time and my knees are shaking, my body is at its physical limits. It's pathetic how weak I am.

I don't have the will or strength to start running again, and drag my legs through the suburb. Out of the street, I reach the embankment that goes along the river and also works as a city boundary. Walking along it, I can look down on the weed-ridden riverbank. It's a fun place for elementary school students to play all year round.

From the embankment, some stairs with tall trees planted alongside them lead down to the riverbank. Among them is that tall, big cherry tree that gives me shade in the late afternoon, my favorite place. I love it not just because it's perfect for me, but also because I can overlook the surrounding area, including the riverbed and the bridges crossing the river.

I thought I could take a break there, but Miyano is sitting there under the tree.

He's facing the river sitting down quietly, not moving a muscle. He's holding his knees with his arms, and is resting his face in them.

It's so surprising to see him that it doesn't seem real. I feel like running over to check if he's a figment of my imagination, or a ghost. Instead, I can't ignore the feeling of fear building up within me. In the end, I go down the stairs slowly, checking each step.

When I call his name, he raises his head slowly. He's the real thing. I'm relived, before I see his face and start to worry. He's not bright and energetic as usual, and he has the same pale complexion he was sporting when I left him earlier.

He waits for me to say something.

"Hey, uh…" I start, thinking about what to say next. I know there are other things I should say, but instead, I ask him what I want to know.

"Did you know that keychain was Mana's?"

Instead of answering my question, Miyano stands up straight and offers me his seat at the foot of the tree.

"Sit in the shade," he says.

Hesitating a little bit, I close my parasol and lean against the tree trunk. That seems to be the right choice. The rough tree trunk on my back feels cool, comfortable against my exhausted body.

Miyano steps out of the shade. Lit by the setting sun, his body shines

golden yellow.

"At first," he starts with his back turned to me, "I thought it was your keychain. But you made a funny face when you were looking at it, so I figured it was Mana's. To tell you the truth, I saw her looking for something before you found the keychain. I thought that you could give it back to her."

"Why did you know there were two?" I ask.

"I mean," he looks at me as if it's nothing out of the ordinary.

"It's your keychain, of course I know about it."

I can't figure out what to say to him in return. He remembers what keychains are on people's bags? How strange.

"I can't help it, it was always on your bag. You did take it off recently, though."

I feel heat flooding my face instantly. Moreover, I meet his gaze directly and I don't know what to do.

"You've got a good memory," I say, trying desperately to say something nice. He smiles at me.

It's a soft smile I have never seen him make at school. Even a sarcastic person like me can understand that it's not fake. My cheeks blush as if they were hit by sunlight, and I look down at my feet. I dig at the brown soil under them with the tip of my sandals.

I don't know why.

I don't know at all why he likes me, though now I'm sure he's not just joking about it.

He looks up to the sky and says,

"I always thought you were amazing. Whenever anyone asks you about your allergy, you just brush it off, like, ‘Yeah, I have an allergy, got a problem with that?' You're always...how do I say it? Your own person? I always thought that was great."

No, I'm not.

I almost say it, but I control myself.

I'm not tough at all.

I always pretend to be strong, but in fact, I feel inferior to everyone else. I'm jealous and envious of them. I want to run around the track, go swimming, and join the marching band on sunny days.

But I can't, no matter what I say. I only hurt myself by saying it out loud. So I gave up. I had to make do with what I have, and get used to it. The only way to protect myself was pretending to be fine with it.

"At first I thought you were amazing," he continues. "Before I knew it, I was watching you all the time. I started to think that you looked more relaxed with Mana than the other girls in your clique. I wondered why. Then, I noticed that Mana was calling you ‘Itsuko', not ‘Natsuko'. When I realized that...". Miyano stops, and I look up at him. When we make eye contact, he says,

"I understood. There really are things that get to you. You actually don't like being called by your nickname. So then, I thought, ‘you're an ordinary girl'."

I feel like the knot in my stomach unravels, spreading a colorful, bright pattern in my body. The sunlight dazzles my eyes. I wonder why the sun that I hated so much can look so beautiful when it shines. My heart pounds, my body feels like it's trembling, and I have difficulty breathing, like something is stuck in my throat.

Why haven't I noticed him watching me until now?
Why haven't I looked properly at him until now?
Why haven't I tried to get to know the real him?

I drew a line between me and the rest of the world, and spent my days cutting things out of my life. For the first time, I regret what I've done.

I can't win against his unwavering gaze, and look down to my feet, managing in a small voice, "Could you...could you tell me why we are alike if I go to the festival with you tomorrow?"

He doesn't reply, and when I look up to him, he is looking at me with a troubled look on his face.

Oh, right. I was the one who told him "Go away!"

My warm feelings turn heavy, sinking deeply, and it's hard to breathe again, in a different way than before.

I feel like I'm about to cry, so I hang my head and clap my hands together.

"I'm sorry. Forget what I just said."

He shakes his hands around in a hurry.

"No, no, no! I was just a little surprised! Well..."

Scratching his face with his finger, he looks up.

"I'm really happy."

He smiles gently, trying to calm me down.

"I really wanted to go to the festival with you, rain or shine," he says, adding,

"Let's meet under the overpass at five thirty tomorrow."

I give him a nod, and he raises his fist in the air.

Chapter Seven - Rain or Shine

It's not a perfect, never-ending blue sky, but the weather is pleasant with wispy white clouds floating in the sky.

In the morning, I went to see Mana off.

"Hey, I was waiting for you," she said.

She waved to me, and I ran to her with my parasol in my hand.

Workers from the moving company were stacking cardboard boxes into a truck. Mana and I sat side by side in the shade on the stone blocks of the bicycle parking area.

"I wish I had something to give you," I said, taking my keychain out of my tote bag.

"But how about we exchange keychains?"

She grabbed the keychain from my hand quickly, grinning widely.

"You know, I was thinking the same thing," she replied.

She also took out her keychain from the pocket of her hooded jacket. She pushed it into my hand. When we compared the bears in our palms, their faces were a little different from each other, though they should have been made in the same way.

"Mana!" her mother called to her.

"I'm coming!" she yelled back.

"I promise to text you when I come back to visit," she said.

"Don't wait until you visit to text, you can always do that," I told her.

"Okay!" she gave me a thumbs-up.

She stood up, the sound of her feet connecting with the ground loud, and brushed her shorts off with her hand. "Man, it's a bummer I can't go to the summer festival this year," she said. "Are you going to the festival with anyone this year, Itsuko?"

I gave her a small nod, put my hand on my mouth, and lowered my voice.

"Just between you and me..."

"Wait, what? No way, why are you going to the festival with Miyano?"

I laughed and said, "It's a long story."

Mana's mother called for her again.

"You can text me the details!" she nudged me, stretching her arm out.

"See you," I brought my hand up to meet it with force.

The sound of our high five melted into the deep blue sky.

Summer has just begun.

I'm wearing a yukata for the first time in three years.

The yukata I wore as a kid is too short for me now, so I borrow my mom's. It's a deep navy blue, like the summer night sky. There are large flowers bursting like fireworks on it. When my mom fastens it with a light yellow obi, I feel a little more grown-up.

"Why don't you go out after dark?" Mom asks.

I put on my geta at the entrance and answer her, "It's okay. It'll be dark soon."

I pick up a red cloth drawstring bag with a white flower petal pattern. The small bell attached to it tinkles when I move it.

"It's cloudy, and the sun isn't that strong. Plus, I have my parasol. See you later." I say on my way out.

The clopping of the geta I'm not used to wearing spurs me on. I see my shadow on the asphalt ground, wearing a yukata and holding a parasol. The sun is still high, and my shadow, me in a yukata and holding my parasol, stretches out and looks like an adult. My navy blue yukata and black parasol look pretty good together. Spinning my parasol, I feel like a Japanese Mary Poppins. I almost start humming, before I realize what I'm doing and stop myself.

Along the way, I join the flow of families and couples heading to the festival. As I get closer to the shrine, the crowd gets bigger and bigger. I take in the joyful atmosphere instead of going against it. Sounds from the festival ring and echo in my ears, people working booths calling out to customers, and the sound of flutes and taiko drums.

Our meeting spot, the overpass, is almost halfway between my house and the shrine. I move to the shade of one of the pillars holding up the overpass, and close my parasol with a long sigh. I look around slowly because I don't want to look obvious. Miyano isn't here yet. I look at the

time on my cell phone in my drawstring bag. It's five twenty-nine p.m.

I hold my purse with both hands, and stand with my toes together. I feel more ladylike than usual. What should I do if he says I'm trying too hard? That idea suddenly worries me, and makes me uneasy. I try to keep my composure with all the nerves in my face. I hear the sound of my blood rushing through my whole body. Wondering what I am doing, my face burns up, and I bring my hand up to cover my mouth. I'm losing it.

The sound of cars on the overpass and the voices of people walking to the shrine all pass me by. The heat in my face that made me anxious goes down gradually, and I begin to feel a dull pain in my stomach.

He's late.

I look at the clock on my cell phone again and again, and it's already two to six. He's almost 30 minutes late, and there is still no sign of him.

I'm already past the peak of my anxiety, and I start to feel worse and worse. Maybe he really was just making fun of me. It makes me sad for a moment, but I remember the face he made yesterday and change my mind. I should stop being so pessimistic. It's a bad habit of mine.

Yesterday, Miyano asked for my phone number when he left. He tried to remember it by repeating it again and again, because he left his mobile phone at home. Maybe something happened to him, and he can't contact me because he remembered the wrong number.

I remember what he said yesterday.

""I really wanted to go to the festival with you, rain or shine.""

Something feels wrong about that. I repeat it twice out loud to myself, and realize what's wrong.

""Wanted? "" Why did he use the past tense?

An anxiety that I can't explain in words comes up slowly from deep inside of my stomach. I feel choked, like my throat is being squeezed. My blood vessels are pounding, alarms going off in my head.

I walk back the way I came holding my parasol, and turn at the corner.

Miyano's house looks exactly the same as yesterday. There are no cars,

and a navy color mountain bike is still parked there in the garage. I look up, and there are curtains closed tightly in the second floor window. When I move a little from the front side of the house and peek at his garden, nobody's there and the window curtains are closed.

I go back to the gate, stick my finger out gently and try to push the intercom, when someone calls out from behind me.

"Are you Takeshi's friend?"

A very housewife-like woman is standing with a bag of carrots and leeks on her arm. She looks around my mother's age. After looking at her hard, I nod in a hurry.

"I don't think anybody's home," she says.

The woman's eyes dart about and she mutters, "Didn't they even tell his school? Takeshi had?"

My geta sound very loud as I run. They almost slip off of my feet at small steps up and down. I curse each time, and feel impatient with myself. They makes my vision blur, so I try to stop my tears that are about to flood out. My purse is shaking at my waist; its little bell is tinkling loudly, urging me to go faster. My desperation bubbles up inside me, expanding so much that it's about to explode.

"Takeshi had an allergy attack the other day and they took him to the hospital. I hear his symptoms are pretty bad. I think they checked him in that night."

Words I just heard flash by, bursting into my vision again and again. "Allergy," "Attack," "Hospital". But most of all…

What does she mean, **"the other day?"**

The big general hospital is a five-minute walk from the station. I can't wait for the glass automatic door to open, and run into the white hospital filled with the smell of antiseptic. I feel the cool air conditioning instantaneously, my geta clanging in the lobby.

As soon as I think, I made it, I relax, put my hands on the nearby wall, and breathe hard. When I look down at my feet, I see red blisters where the top part of the geta was rubbing against my big toes.

It's kind of late to feel pain now. When I raise my head, sweat trickles down my face, and I see all the patients and nurses in the lobby staring at me.

Still short of breath, I look around. I see a sign that says, "General Reception" and start to run again. When I reach it, I grab onto the counter with my hands so I don't fall down.

"Can you tell me Takeshi Miyano's room number?"

'Takeshi Miyano'

I stop in front of the room with Miyano's name written on a changeable nameplate on its door. It's a single room in the medical ward. I knock on the sliding door.

"Yes?" a young woman answers.

I take a deep breath and say, "Hello," opening the door gently.

White curtains are shaking from the air conditioner. There's a brown shelf with nothing on it, and a folding chair that's still closed. The bed is in the center of the room with the nurse call button coming out of it. Someone is lying on the bed, covered by a white blanket. Though I can't see his face from the entrance, I recognize the sunburned arm sticking out of the blanket.

A woman about twenty years old is sitting on a stool next to the bed. She's holding a cell phone in her hand.

"Are you Itsuko, by any chance?"

The woman holding the cell phone has round eyes that show her bright nature. Her facial expression with her eyes blinking reminds me of Miyano.

"I'm glad you came, now I don't have to send this text message!"

She stands up, and beckons towards me happily, "Please, come here. Takeshi just regained consciousness this morning, and he kept shouting at me, ‘Send Itsuko a text message!' Now he's even worse, because he was yelling so much."

I approach the bed cautiously. IV tubes are extending from the bed. Miyano, sleeping on the bed with a thin blanket up to his chin, has a face I have never seen?as white as a sheet. His cheeks are red and swollen like he's caught the mumps, and his lips are dry and pale.

Not knowing what to say, I see him opening his eyes slowly, showing a smile on his lips. It is the same soft smile as yesterday.

His sister gives me her chair, puts down her mobile phone and leaves

the room saying, "I'll get out of your way now." The text she was writing is still on the display.

'Sorry, I can't make it to the festival today. What I said wasn't a lie.'

"Hey," I hear a raspy voice and look up. Miyano, blinking his eyes slowly, is looking at the white ceiling.

"I'm allergic...to rain. It's pretty bad. If I touch this thing called acid rain, I get allergic attacks."

I remember him running away in the sudden rain, getting his shirt wet.

"Is it because of the rain the other day?" I ask.

It was because he lent me his umbrella that he got caught in the rain, but I didn't even use it.

"I didn't think it would be that bad," he says.

People called him Takeshi Miyano, "the sun harbinger." But that's not really it. It's just that he only comes to school when it's sunny. It's the same as my nickname, "Natsuko," except he didn't tell anyone about it. That's why all those rumors about him started.

"You probably won't believe me when I say this, but…when I got up yesterday morning, no one noticed me. Even if I tried singing and dancing in front of them, everyone just ignored me. I even saw myself lying on my bed. So I thought I was dead. I didn't know what to do, and I thought of going to school, and then…"

He stops tentatively, and looks at me.

"You're the only one who noticed me."

When I picked up the keychain? That's why he was so surprised?

"I figured God gave me some extra time, and I wanted to do what I could for you. At least, that's my side of the story. What if this is all just a dream?"

I gently touch his hand sticking out of the blanket. His hand is warm and heavy enough for me to know it's real.

"It's not a dream." Saying it only once didn't seem like enough, so I repeat myself, "It's not a dream."

"Thanks to you, Mana and I are friends again," I tell him.

I also add what I couldn't tell him yesterday.

"Thank you so much."

Miyano, looking surprised and widening his eyes, closes them, looking more relaxed.

"I feel like I've just died a peaceful death," he says.

"Even if we couldn't go to the summer festival?" I ask.

"Right, the festival," he opens his eyes slowly and looks at me. His gaze goes down gradually from the top of my head, giving me a once over like the other day.

"But I'm glad I got to see you in a yukata."

It's weak, but he has a grin on his face, which is now completely familiar to me.

Just then, we hear a short, loud bang that shakes the window glass and our bodies, all the way to our stomachs.

Fireworks!

We hear a bang, then three more, in succession. We also hear the small sound of crackling sparks.

"If you move closer to the window, you can see the fireworks," he says from the bed. I shake my head.

"I don't need to see them this year. Plus, it won't be fair to you," I say, and he closes his eyes gently to carefully listen to the fireworks.

The skyrocketing sound of fireworks reverberates comfortably in my eardrums. After a while, I begin to hear a quiet snoring sound mixed in with it.

I guess summer isn't that bad.

"Let's go to the summer festival together next summer."

Whether it rains or shines that day, next year.

The sounds Miyano makes in his sleep change a little bit, and I smile.

The End

Afterword

Hello. My name is Madoka Harumi. Whether this is the first time you're reading one of my novels or not, I'd like to say thank you very much for reading "Whether It Rains or Shines Tomorrow".

Everything said, here is the afterword. I didn't know what to write in an afterword, so I looked it up on Google. Even after that, I still don't really know what to write.

I'll just write down my thoughts as they come to me.

I started writing novels when I was in junior high school. (I was drawing manga when I was in elementary school.) Back then, I wrote my novels in notebooks or on Japanese-style manuscript paper, and had my friend read them.

One thing that made me happy about winning this award was that I could tell my friend from back then that I won an award for my writing. Like Itsuko and Mana in the novel, we are totally different from each other. (I am strong-willed, and she is gentle.) Strangely enough, we have been good friends since then, and she reads my novels regularly. She is my best supporter as well as my best reader.

My junior high school days were special to me, because I made a lot of good friends, including her, during that time. We had lots of fun back then.

I think junior high school students are only halfway there, not yet adults, but not children anymore, either. Girls start to mature and have more grown-up conversations. But their true natures are straightforward, and

they're very sensitive and easily hurt. I remember thinking about lots of different things, crying and laughing. Furthermore, I myself am prone to allergies, and I used to get caught up in my thoughts, just like Itsuko. But I think that this also helped me gain a lot more things during that time.

Junior high school students are too young to be called adults, but they are capable of having very direct feelings toward others. I hope the characters I have created in this novel reflect that.

...So this is my afterword. How was it? I think it's pretty good!

Finally, I'd like to extend my sincerest gratitude to the people who made this wonderful opportunity possible. I would like to thank the special judge, Mr. Taiyo Fujii, and everyone else who helped put together this Light Novel Contest.

Also, let me say thank you to all of my family and friends for their support. Without your kindness and generosity, I would not have been able to write novels for eighteen years. Thank you very much.

I have spent the majority of my life writing novels. I have it in my view to live a pleasant life like this, writing books. I want to continue writing novels the way I breathe in air.

Therefore, I will devote myself to writing and I look forward to seeing you somewhere. I hope you will support me in the future.

About the author

Madoka Harumi

Born in 1983, Virgo, Blood type A.

She is a writer who was brought up in Chiba and now lives in Tokyo.

She worked for a company as a technical writer for over seven years, and then became a freelance writer. She likes writing more than eating three meals a day. She is a writing junkie and a member of the Japanese Independent Writer Alliance.

She loves the Moomins and Sheena Ringo. Her hobby is music activities.

Her novels are available in the Kindle Store and other e-book providers.

She writes a variety of genres, though many of her novels are for young adults.

Her official website is "White Rabbit Works"
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Message from the Translators 1: Chelsea Inaba

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for picking up this copy of "Whether it Rains or Shines Tomorrow." How was it? When I first read through it, I couldn't put it down, and read it all in one sitting. The story made me put everything else in real life on hold until I read it through, and although it's a love story, it also felt a bit like I was reading a mystery novel, and boy, was I surprised by that twist at the end! Everything that I look for in a book to read was there, all condensed into a length that's very easy to digest! My first thought after finishing it was that I wanted to share it with even more people in English.

The setting of this story is an ‘ordinary' school in an ‘ordinary' town that an ‘ordinary' Japanese school girl goes to. I'm very happy that a novel like this is being translated into English, as it's realistic, painting modern Japan just as it is. I find that other media from Japanese to English have a tendency to be overly exaggerated or over the top, so it's very refreshing to get this kind of story about normal, everyday life. You may find Itsuko and the things she goes through very easy to relate to because of this.

As one of the co-translators of this story, my main goals were keeping the translation as faithful to the original as possible, and making the English translation flow. As a compromise between these two conditions, we created a glossary to explain some of the cultural points that are uniquely Japanese and not fully explained within the story itself. We hope it will help you understand the content while staying faithful to the author's

original vision of the story and characters.

Whether this is your first time reading a Japanese novella or not, I hope that you enjoyed this story, and will continue to read stories from Japan. There are a lot of hidden talented authors here waiting to be found.

Chelsea Inaba

Message from the Translators 2: Yoshino Kazuki

"Whether it Rains or Shines" is the first light novel that I translated into English.

I have not read a light novel for a few decades. So this novel reminded me of my bitter-sweet youthful days that I had almost forgotten. While I was translating it, I felt as if my junior high-school student-self was synchronized with Itsuko.

During this translation, I had a lot of precious experiences, but at the same time, I had a lot of difficulties translating the novel. I was worried whether or not I could get across my thoughts clearly in English because I am not a native English speaker. Japanese is much easier for me to express my feelings. But I hope you will understand what I am thinking in English.

I translate technical documents written in Japanese into English every day at work.

Translating novels is very different from what I'm used to..

I always try to use as simple English as possible when translating them.

But there are a lot of modifiers and creative expressions in this novel, which I found difficult to translate into English.

The followings are some points I found especially difficult.

*Tense

Japanese novels are not so strict with tense. Therefore sometimes present tense and past tense are mixed. On the other hand, English is strict with tense. (At least I think so.) If the present tense is mixed with past tense, readers may get confused. After thinking many times, I decided to use present tense for the things that are occurring now, and past tense for the things that occurred in the past. (This is thanks to my translation partner's advice.)

*Onomatopoeia and mimetic word

Japanese novels are full of Onomatopoeia and mimetic words, while English novels are not. So I had difficulty translating them. For example, what is "karan" (the sound of clogs) in English? What is "don" (the sound of fireworks) expressed in English?

During the translation, I was surprised to find that the English phrase "rain or shine" has a meaning of "whatever happens". (Refer to Chapter 7.) I wonder if the author of this novel knows this and made this title. If she doesn't, what a wonderful coincidence!

I'd like to give many thanks to Chelsea-san, who corrected my translation and Conyac, who supported us. And I'd like to say thank you to all of you that read this novel in English.

Yoshino Kazuki

Aug 31, 2014

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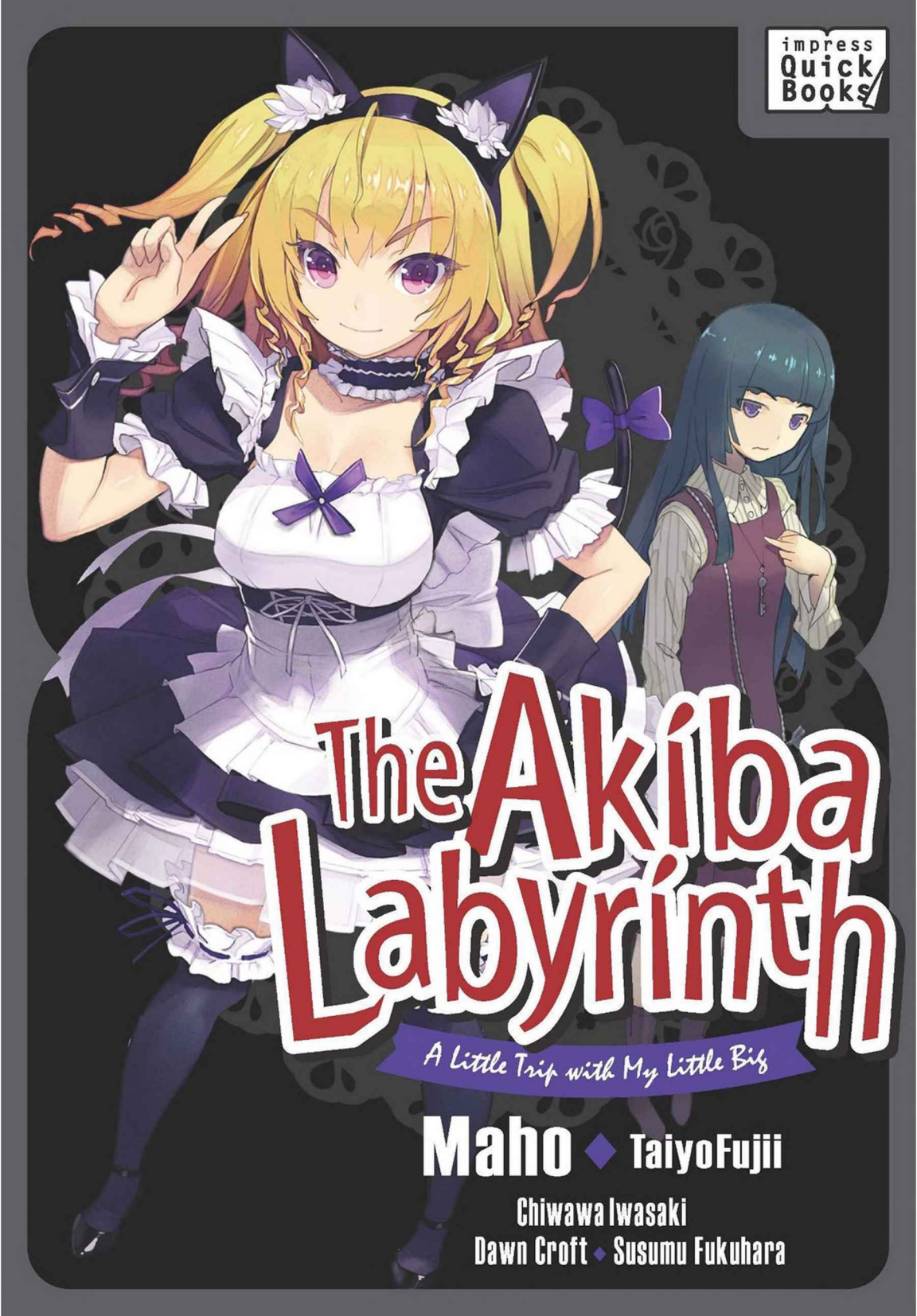
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